

The Ethics of Semantics: Do We Clarify or Obfuscate Reality to Influence Perceptions of Farm Animal Production?

C. C. Croney*¹ and R. D. Reynnells†

**Department of Animal Sciences, Withycombe Hall 112, Oregon State University, Corvallis 97331; and †USDA/Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service/Plant and Animal Systems, 800 9th Street SW, Room 3140 Waterfront Centre, Washington, DC 20250-2220*

ABSTRACT According to linguists, the discourse of animal production uses metaphors, pronouns, and definitions that consistently represent animals as objects, machines, and resources instead of as distinct, unique individuals. Thus, it is argued that genuine concern for animal welfare is either obscured by financial concerns or circumvented entirely, which permits animals to be kept and treated in ways many people would otherwise find objectionable. Substituting euphemisms like crops, units, and harvest for herds, animals, and slaughter, respectively, which are more likely to evoke images of grape plucking than of killing animals for food, might indeed seem disingenuous, especially given the common industry refrain that the public needs to be better educated about food production. However, the implication that the animal industries deliberately use such techniques is debatable. What is clear is that the semantic obfuscations rampant in the language of modern farm animal production reflect underlying ambivalence about transparency relative to many standard industry practices. First, consumers are unlikely to want full disclosure of all aspects of animal

production. Second, there is real risk that certain realities of animal production would be aversive to consumers, who might consequently refuse (as is their right) to purchase particular products, thus potentially causing significant short-term industry losses. Yet, the reluctance of animal industries to come clean in public education efforts raises another problem—that adopting innocuous terminology and withholding information deemed likely to be unpalatable to the public may be morally questionable in itself. Moreover, this provides an avenue for opponents of animal agriculture to exploit, because it may appear that the industry is hiding something. In truth, animal extremists are currently in a position to reveal facts about livestock production that might not only disturb consumers but also cause speculation about the failure of the industries to be forthcoming. As a matter of professional ethics and viability, animal industry members should objectively and aggressively evaluate the discourse of farm animal production to ensure that what is conveyed is accurate and intended.

Key words: ethics, semantics, discourse, animal production

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INTRODUCTION

It is well known that animal agriculture faces increasing scrutiny and criticism relative to contemporary methods of livestock and poultry production. Today, even the language used to discuss animal production within and outside the industries is being examined, and scathing analyses have resulted. Scholars (Stibbe, 2003; Linzey, 2006) have suggested that industry discourse characterizes animals in ways that objectify them and obscure morally relevant characteristics such as animal sentience. Advocates of social change have subsequently suggested that

there is a need for critical examination and changes in the discourse of the animal industries.

Language and Power

According to Burr (1995), language “provides a way in which to structure our experience of ourselves and the world.” Language, it is argued, is also tightly bound to status and power relations (Fairclough, 1992; Hodge and Kress, 1993; Van Dijk, 1997; Stibbe, 2001). Much of the research examining language and power has focused on the relationships between discourse and oppression and exploitation as it pertains to people (Stibbe, 2001). However, communications experts are increasingly examining the ways in which discourse similarly relates to beliefs about and treatment of animals. Discourse, as described by Glenn (2004), is the production of knowledge and power via language. It can be thought of as “a way of

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¹Corresponding author: Candace.croney@oregonstate.edu

talking and writing about an area of knowledge or social practice that both reflects and creates the structuring of that area" (Stibbe, 2001). Thus, discourse and practice are closely intertwined (Schillo, 2003). In regards to animals, then, our ideas about them influence and are influenced by how we interact with and speak about them. How we view animals, indeed, what they mean to us is therefore a social construct that reflects our interactions with them and our cultural identities (Arluke and Sanders, 1996). Many of us, for instance, have clear ideas about the status of animals that are tied to historical and cultural uses of them as resources for food and fiber. Language therefore provides a powerful means by which to communicate our social values and norms, such as the uses and values assigned to animals (Glenn, 2004; Smith-Harris, 2004).

In the animal industries, evidence of the relationship among language, power, and the socially constructed view of animals as human resources is easily found in animal science textbooks. In fact, many introductory chapters of such texts characterize animals as existing solely to serve humans (Schillo, 2003). The political nature of the relationship between humans and animals thus becomes clear—humans domesticated animals and subsequently maintain control over how they are used. Animals are therefore viewed as subordinate to humans—an idea that is reinforced by such factors as the patriarchal nature of western society and religious beliefs related to humans having God-given dominion over animals (Van Dijk, 1997; Scully, 2002). Inevitably, views, which are reflected in and reinforced by our language and interactions with animals, influence how we treat animals.

Critics of animal agriculture therefore object to mastery discourse such as that that appears to be emphasized by the meat industry (Milstein, 2007), arguing that it fosters exploitation and abuse of animals much as sexist language fosters mistreatment of women (Dunayer, 1995).

Discourse and Animal Agriculture

Although discourse analysis may seem irrelevant to animal and poultry scientists, it is important that members of these disciplines understand how current industry jargon relative to animals is viewed and how the study of language is being used to influence public perceptions of animal agriculture. Over a decade ago, Kopperud (1993) noted that a battle for the "hearts and minds of consumers" is being waged between the animal industries and animal activists. Today, much of this battle is being fought through language and the media (Stibbe, 2001).

In an examination of the arguments presented by those who are pro vs. antianimal rights, Swan and McCarthy (2003) found that the types of discourse strategies adopted tend to give the public 2 highly simplistic, contradictory images of human-animal interactions. Thus, both views may contain inaccuracies.

For example, proponents of the proanimal rights view were observed to generally use 2 main arguments. The first situates animal use as a moral problem wherein ani-

mals are ascribed rights in discourses of suffering, oppression, and depravity. The second situates animal use (e.g., meat consumption) as needless and dangerous to human health. Arguing about the factuality of these claims is likely to be ineffective, because the point, according to Swan and McCarthy (2003), is "to promote animal liberation by claiming that animal use has negative effects for humans as well as animals. This sort of claim does not need backing because it is designed to appeal to our *emotions* by evoking doubt or fear."

In contrast, those who argue against animal rights strategies typically adopt the following strategies: they represent animal use as a norm of nature and a practice that is both beneficial and necessary (e.g., for human health, especially in regards to diet and nutrition), and they tend to present human and animal rights as being incompatible. Often, arguments evoke sympathy for the plight of humans who would be disadvantaged were it not for animal use, which effectively positions human suffering as taking precedence over animal suffering (Swan and McCarthy, 2003).

Swan and McCarthy (2003) also note that perhaps the most effective argument of those opposed to animal rights is construction of animal rights as an attempt to deny human rights. Thus, by implication, support of animal rights is constructed as a form of self-delusional hatred of people.

Discourse scholars, several of whom are critical of farm animal production, have also noted that the animal industries use the discourse of science to make animal oppression seem inevitable, natural, and comfortable, referring to language contained in animal and poultry science manuals and technical documents (Sperling, 1988; Glenn, 2004). It is argued that industry ideology is often represented as being based on biological principles and science, whereas animal rights views are relegated to beliefs, fantasies, and dogma.

Deconstructing the Discourse of Animal Agriculture

According to Stibbe (2001, 2003), the external discourse (that used to communicate with the public) of the animal industries presents animal treatment as benign, but the internal discourse (used within industry communications) has different objectives, namely to encourage disregard for animal pain and suffering for the sake of profit (Stibbe, 2001; Eisnitz, 2007).

Stibbe (2001, 2003) notes that a number of linguistic devices are used to place animals in out groups that permit treating them in ways that people would otherwise find objectionable. For example, lexical representations of animals, such as beef instead of cow, steer, or bull and pork, rather than pig, symbolize animals by the products the industry derives rather than as living creatures with inherent value. Representation of an animal as a meat resource for humans is criticized on the grounds that it conceals the meaning of killing a live, sentient being (Singer, 1990; Stibbe, 2001).

Stibbe (2001) also notes that the animal industries preferentially use terminology that characterizes animals as not only different but inferior—qualities required for oppression to take place. He observes differences even in the way that killing is described for animals vs. humans, noting that animals are slaughtered (more recently the term harvested has come into the jargon) rather than murdered and dismembered.

He also points to another technique used to distance people from farm animals, observing that not only are they referred to as units but as mere cooking methods, such as is evoked by the terms broiler and roaster. Because inanimate resources (units and cooking techniques) cannot have feelings and certainly cannot suffer, mistreatment cannot be a problem. Stibbe (2001) argues that this type of discourse therefore makes it possible not just to overlook the animals themselves as inherently worthy beings but also to disregard any suffering they may experience.

Moreover, the selective use of pronouns such as us, him or her, and who for humans vs. them, it, and that for animals has been likened to racist discourse aimed at maintaining differential status and, consequently, different standards of treatment of humans and others (Dunayer, 2001; Stibbe, 2001). Similar themes are observed in Spiegel's (1988) book, *The Dreaded Comparison*. Additionally, the use of mass nouns to represent animals has been identified as problematic in that it removes individuality, which subsequently diminishes individual value and importance of animals, making it easier to exploit or mistreat them (Lawrence, 1994; Stibbe, 2001).

Deliberate Manipulation?

Although these analyses of animal industry discourse may be found by some to be disturbing, Glenn's (2004) examination of language used by the meat industry may be even more disconcerting, because it concludes that sterile language is deliberately used as a strategy to manipulate public perceptions and, thus, artificially construct consumer support.

Glenn (2004) highlights the use of doublespeak, defined as sterile language that is intentionally misleading by being ambiguous or disingenuous. She argues, for instance, that the use of the term euthanasia (literally translated as good death) to describe the killing of piglets by slamming their heads against facility floors or walls (a practice sanctioned by the swine industry under the term blunt trauma for piglets under 3 wk of age weighing 5.5 kg or less) misrepresents the practice as humane and conceals and condones inherent violence and suffering.

Similar observations have been made even by some animal scientists and their colleagues. For instance, Stricklin (1993) noted that "the scientific & educational community has at times adopted the tactic of using public relations strategies, such as language control." Examples of this includes the substitution of the term food and fiber animal for farm animal in the jargon of animal science. Also to be considered is replacement of the term stalls

for crates in discussions of veal calf housing, motivated in part because perpetual attacks by animal activists on veal calf production led some industry members to believe that the term crates was perceived unfavorably by the public. There was therefore impetus to change the terminology although not necessarily the practice itself.

In regards to the issue of farm animal welfare, Thompson (2004) likewise observed that "...various actors have attempted to influence opinion and events by influencing the language used to describe the interests of food animals..." This view is supported by Fraser's (2001) statement that scientists and even some ethicists have at times produced misleading, polarized, and simplistic accounts of animal welfare issues. It should be noted that many animal activists can be readily charged with the same offenses, but their similar actions do not make the practice appropriate or acceptable.

An even more insidious (although probably unintentional) technique, according to Glenn (2004), is the use of speaking animals in advertisements to sell animal products. Using the California "Happy Cows" commercial as an example, Glenn notes that this common advertising practice creates a form of virtual reality that blurs the lines between humans and animals and works to create ways of thinking that obscure animal suffering and endorse what might otherwise be viewed as offensive industry practices.

Glenn (2004) also observes that, ironically, although the inability of animals to speak is often used to morally distance them from humans and to justify treating them in ways that might otherwise be objectionable, popular advertisements give them voices for the express purpose of having people identify with them and buy into their message. Yet, these same animals remain cruelly gagged in that not only are they prevented from articulating their own experiences, but they literally pitch themselves to people, implying that they give their consent to being eaten. When combined with humor, anthropomorphism, and, occasionally, blatant misrepresentation of the conditions under which farm animals such as dairy cows are typically reared, the message becomes even more effective and palatable to people. Although variations of this technique are also used by activists, the ethics of these tactics remain questionable.

Implications of Industry Discourse

Although it is debatable whether the animal industries deliberately use many of the techniques previously described to obfuscate certain aspects of animal production, it is clear that there is ambivalence about full disclosure of many contemporary practices. This is readily reflected in the sanitized language used to describe farm animal products, particularly once animals have reached the processing stage, in which cattle are transformed to beef and chickens become broilers or roasters, breasts, and even more vaguely, nuggets.

There are obvious reasons for such language choices, not the least of which is savvy marketing. For example,

Mills (2003) notes that consumers of fast food are far less troubled at ordering a "bacon burger" than a "murdered bovine with brutally massacred swine strips." Although it is commonplace for advertisers, politicians, and others to selectively use language to achieve their desired goals, it may be argued that animal scientists and industry members have greater obligations to be clear and forthcoming in the language used to communicate with the public. Obfuscated language that is deliberately used to keep consumers guessing is ethically problematic for a number of reasons. First, it is inconsistent with our stated goals and educational missions. It is even more problematic considering that a common refrain (often in response to frustration about criticism of animal agriculture) is that the public needs to be more educated. Moreover, interested members of the public, especially consumers, have the right to know how their food is produced.

Animal industry scientists and other personnel, in particular those involved in meat production, are therefore caught in an interesting catch-22. On the one hand, given that science is touted as being truthful, objective, and (erroneously) value-free, scientists have obligations to be straightforward. This is especially true given the risk of having others reveal disconcerting aspects of animal production, which could erode credibility and further heighten public concern. Yet, complete transparency has its own risks. Most consumers are not likely to want to know all of the gory details about farm animal production, slaughter, and processing. Full disclosure of all production practices, especially those related to animal slaughter, could result in consumer aversion, greater public concern, and consequent economic losses.

Animal industry leaders face a dilemma in this regard, and it is unlikely that given the risks outlined, many will find the idea of completely transparent language appealing. This is probably also true for consumers who prefer the "don't ask, don't tell" approach to food animal production through consumption yet want assurance of proper animal treatment. However, failure to be wholly truthful provides an avenue for opponents of animal agriculture to exploit. In truth, animal extremists are now in a position to reveal facts about livestock production that might not only disturb consumers but also cause speculation about the failure of the industries to be forthcoming. The effects of the reluctance of the industries to come clean is currently being felt in the marketplace, politics, and classrooms, where disparaging remarks about animal agriculture and factory farming are ubiquitous, members of the public and special interest groups are aligning in attempts to legislate farm animal treatment, and children receive mixed messages from teachers and media about the roles of animals in their lives. Clearly, the current situation calls for a critical reevaluation of the educational goals and strategies of the animal and poultry sciences with an emphasis on transparency in both industry discourse and practice.

CONCLUSIONS

Although an analysis of discourse may seem odd and irrelevant to animal and poultry science, it is critically

important that members of the industries be aware that not only is our language being scrutinized but that the results are being effectively exploited by opponents of animal agriculture seeking to disparage animal agriculture. Nonetheless, this type of examination is illuminating in some potentially beneficial ways.

First, it reiterates the importance of being cognizant of and involved with the work conducted by social scientists and other scholars. Second, it reveals areas of potential breakdown in communication between the animal and poultry sciences and industries and members of the public who may consume animal products but desire assurances that animals used for food are treated with appropriate care and regard. Identifying aspects of our discourse that may be off-putting and contradictory to our stated commitment to animal care and welfare may allow us to better connect with members of the public to whom we may convey unintended messages about our values relative to animals. Further, addressing these issues allows us to educate young scientists whose future success in communicating within and outside of the animal sciences and industries is crucial to the viability of these disciplines.

Deconstructing language and related practices is therefore essential to understanding and changing our relationships (Milstein, 2007) both with animals and members of the public. Today's animal industry members need to be mindful of internal and external language choices and what they represent (Dunayer, 2001), because the view that animal science's main goal is to maximize profit without regard for the experiences of animals is irreconcilable with the belief (held by much of the public) that animals have some value or significance beyond their use (Cuomo, 2003). Animal and poultry scientists are therefore more likely to make headway with those who are genuinely concerned about animal welfare if our use of language reflects an appreciation for animals as sentient beings, rather than merely as walking products. It is also important for members of the animal sciences and industries to situate animal interests and human welfare not just as compatible but interdependent.

Stricklin (1993) stated: "It is appropriate for academia to be sensitive to industry image. But failure to recognize, anticipate and deal with real issues is a threat to agricultural institutions." It may be necessary to reconsider several aspects of animal production relative to ideology, discourse, and practice. Transparency of contemporary animal production practices and a real ethic of care and respect for animals must be embodied not just in our practices but also in the internal and external discourse of animal agriculture.

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